

Imagining New Feminist Futures:

How feminist social movements contest the neoliberalization of feminism in an increasingly  
corporate dominated world

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**ABSTRACT**

Increasingly it is argued that feminism has been co-opted by neoliberal agendas: becoming more individualistic and losing touch with its wider social change objectives. The neoliberalization of feminism is driven in part by increased corporate power, including the growing role of corporations in governance arenas, and corporate social responsibility agendas. However, we turn to social movement theory to elucidate strategies that social movements, including feminist social movements, are adopting in such spaces. In so doing, we find that feminist activists are engaging with new political opportunities, mobilizing structures and strategic framing processes that emerge in the context of increasingly neoliberal and privatized governance systems. We suggest that despite the significant challenges to their agendas, far from being co-opted by neoliberalism, feminist social movements remain robust, existing alongside, and developing new strategies to contest the neoliberalization of feminism in a variety of innovative ways.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism; Neoliberalism; Feminist social movements; Corporate social responsibility; New governance

Whilst there has never been one ‘pure’ form of feminism, and heated debates over its objectives and practices as a social movement continue (Funk, 2013; Prügl, 2015), broadly:

“Feminism is about the social transformation of gender relations” (Butler, 2004: 204), and about the quest for justice through reducing gender inequality by advancing the diverse interests of women (Walby, 2011), as well as achieving equity through structural change (Grosser, Moon & Nelson, 2017, p.542).

This onus on social transformation of gender relations through structural changes underlies feminist social movements’ broadly defined aims: to mobilize through collective action to achieve a common good and equality for all (Dean, 2010).

Critics of contemporary feminism argue that these objectives have recently been cannibalized by neoliberalism. Fraser (2013), Prügl (2015) and Rottenberg (2014), among others, argue strongly that the ‘neoliberalization of’ feminist movement agendas has occurred. This includes the emergence of ‘transnational business feminism’ (Roberts, 2015) whereby states, corporations, international bodies and NGOs develop a ‘business case’ for women’s equality, and ‘market feminism’ (Kantola and Squires, 2012) whereby products and marketing campaigns draw on feminist notions of ‘choice’ (Kirkpatrick, 2010) and ‘empowerment’ as selling points. Indeed, the ostensibly feminist goals of empowerment, choice and agency have proliferated as buzzwords under neoliberal feminism (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Rottenberg, 2014). These are defined with reference to the advancement of individual women, rather than as a shared struggle in search of collective solutions to advance gender equality in society (Rottenberg, 2014). The neoliberalization of feminism has proliferated in the context of rising corporate power and neoliberal economics (Rottenberg, 2014), and has involved sidelining debates about the gendered, and racialized, structures and substructures which underpin organizations and which perpetuate inequality (Acker, 2006).

Yet feminist social movements have not gone away. They are, in fact, alive and kicking. We argue that we need to look more closely at how they are evolving to adopt new strategies for gender equality in the context of an increasingly corporate-dominated world. It is these strategies that this paper elucidates and theorizes in such contexts. By so doing we address the question of how feminist social movements contest the neoliberalization of feminism in an increasingly corporate-dominated world and develop new strategies for their transformative social change objectives?

In addressing these issues, our paper focuses on corporations. Corporations have been of longstanding interest to feminist scholars because they employ large numbers of people globally, and have been shown to rely on gender inequality as a resource (Acker, 2006), exploiting women's low pay transnationally and relying upon the unpaid care work done by women to sustain workers and organizations. In this sense organizations can be conceived of as 'inequality regimes' (Acker, 2006). Corporations are also powerful: influencing regulation, business practices and popular culture globally, including gender relations. We argue that the growing economic and political power of corporations, and their global reach, means that the ways in which they do or do not address gender equality have become increasingly important with respect to feminist agendas, and increasingly worthy of investigation (Grosser & Moon, 2017).

One of the key ways in which corporations advance more neoliberal forms of feminism is through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Roberts, 2015; Tornhill, 2016a). CSR is a highly contested concept extending to corporate accountability for social and environmental impacts, and involves a wide range of strategies, actions and governance systems relating to workplaces, supply chains, communities and the environment (Crane, Matten and Moon, 2008). Numerous social movements now focus on and develop strategies to influence corporations, as well as governments, acting as adversaries but also at

times as partners (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007; Mena and Waeger, 2014; Rasche, de Bakker and Moon, 2013), including in CSR initiatives. Therefore, it would not be surprising to find feminist social movements also campaigning against corporations, participating in CSR initiatives, or building new alliances with corporate actors. Our paper thus explores the ways in which these strategies are emerging amongst feminist social movements. Our key argument is that in order to understand the neoliberalization of feminism, and in particular how it is being contested, we need to refocus our attention on feminist social movements themselves, where activism occurs. To this end, we draw upon social movement theory (SMT) (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996; Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000) to elucidate feminist activist involvement in political opportunities, mobilizing structures and strategic framing processes in the context of new governance involving business as well as government.

Our paper makes two contributions: first we extend theory with respect to the relationship between CSR and feminism (Grosser and Moon, 2017), contributing to research on the neoliberalization of feminism and providing a conceptual framework for further research on this topic. Second, we provide examples of new kinds of feminist activist strategies that contest the neoliberalization of feminism as advanced by corporations, and through CSR.

Our theory paper proceeds as follows. We first define the neoliberalization of feminism, explore the rising power of corporations, and their involvement in new governance systems. We elucidate the growth of CSR and gender initiatives as key sites where neoliberal feminism is being advanced. We then use three key SMT concepts: political opportunities; mobilizing structures and strategic framing processes; to help us explore how feminist social movements organise and agitate for change. We argue that far from being co-opted, feminist social movements contest neoliberalism in a variety of innovative ways.

### **The neoliberalization of feminism and the rise of corporations**

‘Neoliberalism’ is a contested, yet ubiquitous concept. Prügl (2015), drawing on Larner (2000) and Ferguson (2009), presents three main facets of neoliberalism: politically, neoliberalism is characterized by a limited role for government in social welfare and business regulation. Economically, neoliberalism reflects the ideologies of free market economies, related to de-regulation, austerity and free trade. Culturally, neoliberalism is characterized by ‘the application of private market forces to public governance while vice versa inserting themselves into the most intimate realms of privacy’ (Prügl, 2015, p.617). Individualism, as opposed to collectivism, runs through all three of these domains.

Feminism, it is argued, has recently followed in this vein (Dean, 2010; Rottenberg, 2014). Feminist movements are characterized by ‘shared struggle, common connection with other women and the pursuit and implementation of collective solutions to communal problems’ (Adamson et al., 2016, p.2). This differs substantially from neoliberalized versions of feminism which focus on individual women’s advancement. The latter proliferate in corporations, where women leaders are told to ‘lean in’ (Rottenberg, 2014), often accompanied by a business case which emphasizes how individual women’s empowerment benefits corporations (Roberts, 2015). For example, promoting women in business can enhance: reputation (Bear, Rahman and Post, 2010); access to new markets (Dolan and Scott, 2009) and investment ratings (Miles, 2011). Neoliberalized feminism legitimizes ‘the same neoliberal macroeconomic framework that has sustained gender-based inequality and oppression’ (Roberts, 2015, p.209) as it emphasizes corporate growth, and individual- above collective- advancement. Tornhill (2016b, p.14) argues that corporate adoptions of feminism ‘tend to be implicated in the very replacement of politics’. This is important as it suggests that feminism in the modern era has become toothless: depoliticized, co-opted by corporate

interests, and lacking an understanding of the structural elements of women's oppression (and potential for emancipation) (Dean, 2010; Eisenstein, 2009). Next, we interrogate further the context in which these changes have occurred.

### *Neoliberalism, corporations and CSR*

In the context of neoliberalism, and as a consequence of associated privatization, deregulation, liberalization, and a 'hollowing out' of government (Rhodes, 1996), the private sector is playing an ever-increasing role in employment, and in societal governance globally (Crane et al., 2008; Moon, 2002; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Corporations have become increasingly involved in regulatory, and indeed citizenship, processes as evidenced in the growth of 'privatized governance' (Scholte, 2005), and in the rapid expansion of new governance systems, including multi-stakeholder governance involving business, government and civil society actors in processes concerning public goods of all kinds (Crane et al., 2008).

For feminists organizing to advance gender equality these changes are significant. Nearly twenty years ago UNIFEM (2000, p.82) noted 'more women taking legislative decisions, but at a time when economic decision-making power is moving away from legislatures'. Thus, it is increasingly recognized that new strategies for change are necessary where 'the state has become the market, with the result that women's emancipation depends on negotiating with the state and the market in more complex ways' (Metcalf and Woodhams, 2012, p.133). Yet, few feminist scholars to date have explored in any detail the nature of such negotiations that involve market actors as well as the state. Our paper advances this research agenda.

As the role and power of the private sector has grown globally vis-à-vis governments, we have witnessed the growth of CSR. This is evidenced by: the plethora of CSR reports (KPMG, 2015); growth of CSR consultancies; the engagement of CSR professionals, and the

proliferation of CSR initiatives and standards of various kinds around the world. While sometimes viewed in a positive light in view of the potential to extend responsible business practice globally, others have interpreted this focus on CSR as a way to ameliorate criticism of the growing power of business in society, and as a legitimizing process serving corporate interests (Banerjee, 2010; Fleming and Jones, 2013).

Meanwhile CSR as an academic field has burgeoned (de Bakker and den Hond, 2008). CSR research has developed from being ‘corporate-centred’ to a ‘corporate-oriented’ concept and field of scholarship (Rasche et al., 2013) extending to ‘new accountability’ (McBarnet et al., 2007) for business social and environmental impacts (Gond, Kang and Moon, 2011), and drawing upon a wide range of theoretical perspectives. CSR research also increasingly discusses the role of corporations in new governance systems involving collaboration with government and civil society in multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) to develop and implement soft law with respect to social and environmental issues (Rasche et al., 2013). These developments are commonly referred to in the literature on ‘political CSR’ which particularly addresses the role of business firms as political actors, and their potential contribution to public goods (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007; Scherer et al., 2016). In sum CSR is a highly contested concept, and ‘the CSR movement is a discursive and material struggle about business practice; it represents a politicization of the social content of the institutions that govern private economic activity’ (Ougaard, 2006, p.236). In this sense, CSR is a new site of political engagement for social movements that aim to hold corporations to account for their impacts upon society.

Following this logic, we contend that CSR involves important new sites of governance and political contestation which we would expect feminist social movements to have to engage with in order to advance their agendas, not as an alternative to strategies focused on the state, but in addition to these. Indeed, the CSR literature notes engagement by

radical as well as more moderate social movements, working on environmental issues for example. Research explores how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society actors influence companies through adversarial campaigns as well as collaborative partnerships, or a combination of the two (Den Hond, 2010; Mena and Waeger, 2014; Soule, 2009). Scholars reveal a range of NGO strategies including those intended to change individual companies, and also strategies aimed at field level change through influencing the rules of the game, as represented in CSR norms and indicators, for example. Thus, social movements increasingly focus campaigns on corporations themselves, and on CSR initiatives as new sites for political activism in a neoliberal world. Our interest in this paper is in how feminist social movements engage in these new strategies and spaces.

### *CSR and gender equality*

CSR policies and initiatives increasingly reference gender equality. Regarding the co-optation of feminist agendas by neoliberal interests (Fraser, 2013), these developments are described as one manifestation of the neoliberalization of feminism (Prügl, 2015). Corporate actors such as Wal-Mart, Coca-Cola and Vodafone claim to be ‘empowering’ women in their value chains, and support international campaigns such as #HeforShe, just as ‘Gender economics [as] smart economics’ (World Bank, 2006) has become an unquestioned concept in many international and national bodies, both public and private (Elias, 2013). Concurrently a growing number of studies have both praised (Karam and Jamali, 2013; McCarthy and Muthuri, 2016) and venerated (Roberts, 2015; Pearson, 2007) approaches to gender equality led by corporations through CSR. Praise herein tends to focus on ways in which CSR initiatives can help individual women in economic terms (Dolan and Scott, 2009), although even these claims are increasingly contested in the literature regarding the experiences of the



women ‘beneficiaries’ of such initiatives (McCarthy, 2017; forthcoming; Tornhill, 2016a; 2016b).

However, despite the many negative judgements of gender and CSR initiatives by critical feminist scholars, others have adopted an approach which is both critical *and* engaged with respect to CSR and gender equality (Grosser, 2016; Prügl, 2015). They do this via a discussion of feminist social movements, investigating the way ‘selective feminist movement ideas are being integrated into neoliberal rationales and logics, what is lost in the process and what is perhaps gained’ (Prügl, 2015, p.614). Research on feminist social movements and CSR is important given that their involvement in such spaces, or lack of it, will be one factor determining how this process of neoliberalization plays out.

Finally, we note that feminism is always a political project (Calás and Smircich, 2006). Engagement by feminist scholars with CSR to date relates to at least six different CSR theoretical perspectives including ethical, instrumental, stakeholder, political, institutional and critical theories of CSR (Grosser and Moon, 2017). However, viewed through the lens of feminist theory all CSR is political in that gender relations, and specifically gender inequality, are inherent in all organizational, and thus CSR, practices and processes (Acker, 2006). Therefore, while our emphasis here on CSR as a process of new governance (involving business and civil society actors as well as government) aligns most closely with ‘political CSR’, our discussion is deliberately wide-ranging with respect to the CSR initiatives that we discuss. This follows the literature on NGOs and CSR more generally, which addresses NGO involvement not only in ‘political CSR’ projects that affect field-level change, but also engagement with specific corporations and their CSR initiatives.

### **Social movement theory**

We now turn to SMT (Benford and Snow, 2000; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1996; Snow and Benford, 1992; Tarrow, 1994), specifically its application to feminist movements (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000). Since the 1980s feminist social movements around the world have moved from a primary focus on protest, to engagement with the state (Walby, 2011). This has involved pressurizing for changes in government policy and its implementation at local, regional, national and international levels from outside the state, gaining representation on state legislative bodies, and working for change from within state, and international governmental bureaucracies, wherein ‘femocrats’ have acted as tempered radicals (Meyerson and Scully, 1995) through a range of government machinery (Walby, 2011). There is a large body of literature exploring how feminist activists have organised themselves in myriad locations, manners and historic moments (Moghadam, 2013). SMT has been employed in this analysis, for example, to explore the ‘political opportunities’ for women’s groups in the UK, France and Germany (Poloni-Staudinger & Ortals, 2011), the US (Banaszak, 2010), and globally (Moghadam, 2013). Scholars have studied the ‘strategic framing processes’ necessary for domestic violence policy development in South Korea (Heo, 2010), Scotland and Wales (Charles & Mackay, 2013), and feminist ‘mobilizing structures’ in the form of formal and informal activist groups working within transnational organizations such as the UN (Joachim, 2007; Moghadam, 2013) and the EU (Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000). It has become clear that women’s NGOs, and the social movements they represent, have helped us move beyond a focus on individual equal opportunities and non-discrimination, to challenge systems and structures that cause gender inequality at a policy level (Cullen, 2015; Moghadam, 2013). Yet attention has focused on the role of social movements with respect to the state and international institutions (Banaszak, 2010; Joachim, 2007). We note little discussion of feminist social movements/activism in relation to the private sector as a political actor, within new governance systems. So, the question arises as

to how feminist social movements advance their agendas in the context of the rising power of corporations in societal governance, CSR, and the associated neoliberalization of feminism?

In sum, SMT is useful in addressing this question as it explores how social movement actors (we hereby refer to these as ‘feminist activists’ *vis à vis* our focus) organise and agitate for social change (Moghadam, 2013). In the following sections, in line with feminist social movement scholars investigating NGO-state activism, we draw upon three well-grounded concepts deriving from SMT, each of which comprise elements of social movement strategies for change: 1/ Political opportunities; 2/ Mobilizing structures and 3/ Strategic Framing processes. These are not mutually exclusive, often overlapping and feeding into one another (McAdam et al., 1996). Using extant literature and recent empirical examples, we discuss how these strategies for change are being adopted by feminist social movements in neoliberal times, and particularly through the growing phenomenon of CSR.

### *Political Opportunities*

Political opportunities include ‘consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people’s expectations for success or failure’ (Tarrow, 1994, pp.76-77). In the feminist literature political opportunities are further defined as 1/ access points into political structures; and 2/ the existence of elite allies within these (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000). We follow this two-point definition.

**Access Points:** Above we have argued that corporations, and CSR, have become new important political arenas. These include new organizational forms: MSIs such as the United Nations Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative, the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI); and public-private partnerships (Crane et al., 2008; Rasche et al., 2013). MSIs can comprise

political opportunity access points for corporate-focused activism (Mena and Waeger, 2014), as they bring different groups of actors together to develop norms, guidelines, principles and evaluation criteria for responsible business practice (den Hond and de Bakker, 2007; Mena and Waeger, 2014; Rasche et al., 2013), in effect creating new forms of soft regulation. Such settings constitute arenas for meaning-making, defining what issues, topics and approaches are on corporate agendas, and how they are expected to be accountable for their impacts upon society. Imbalances of power in these arenas means that corporations have disproportionate influence over decision-making therein, or at least a power of veto beyond that of other actors. Nevertheless, the presence of more critical movements and actors can temper the advancement of corporate agendas and increase the likelihood that accountability processes include the interests of less powerful actors such that participation matters (Bebbington et al., 2007; Grosser, 2016).

New governance arenas may also offer opportunities to feminist social movements (Grosser and Moon, 2005). Interviews with leaders of women's NGOs in the UK and Australia reveal some 'see CSR as an alternative regulatory compliance process when it comes to equalities law, and as a process of business accountability' (Grosser, 2016, p.71), and thus consider CSR as a potential site for feminist social movement activism. Kilgour (2007) scrutinizes the feminist potential (and drawbacks) of the UN Global Compact, whilst Bexell (2012) and Prügl and True (2014, p.1159) argue that CSR 'partnerships in support of gender equality and women's empowerment bring together the legacies of neoliberalism and feminism, with different results in different contexts', enabling potential co-optations but also new openings for change.

Many studies depict the inadequacy of CSR codes of conduct for women workers in value chains (Alamgir and Cairns, 2015; Barrientos et al., 2003; Hales and Wills, 2007). This is especially the case for informal workers, who are disproportionately female and

unprotected by formal employment contracts. However, studies also indicate that CSR codes can be conceived of as access points for feminist activists, because corporate codes of conduct can provide opportunities to go beyond limitations of minimal legislation (Barrientos et al. 2003). Elias (2003, p.283) posits that despite their limitations ‘these codes do provide a space for the bringing in of gender concerns into the labor standards debate’. A good example can be found in the involvement by the small British NGO Women Working Worldwide (WWW) in setting up the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), an international MSI which works with large corporations to improve value chain practices (Barrientos and Evers, 2014; Hale and Opondo, 2005; Hale and Wills, 2007). WWW collaborated with the Central America Women’s Network and UK-based homeworking organizations, to influence the development of the ETI value chain base code. This was important given the fact that the vast majority of low-skilled workers in ETI company supply chains are women. Ongoing engagement with the ETI allows such NGOs to also influence code implementation. WWW then focused on trying ‘to bridge the gaps between these high-level initiatives and women workers themselves’, and ‘developed international consultation and education projects about company codes of conduct in Asia’ (Hale and Wills, 2007, pp.463-4) to better address gender issues. Indeed, the setting up of the Kenyan Horticultural Ethical Business Initiative which uses participatory social auditing methodologies was the main outcome of the campaign by women’s NGOs described by Hale and Opondo (2005), aimed at facilitating voice for women workers. Hale and Wills (2007, p.473) argue that ‘successful workers’ organization increasingly depended on understanding global value chains, mapping the connections between workers and consumers along any chain, and using the information to find points of leverage to target leading brand names’. Feminist activists are increasingly using such strategies it seems.

Further access points arise in the context of corporate stakeholder engagement processes, where local women's organizations pressure companies for change. In the mining sector, Gibson and Kemp (2008) reveal engagement in negotiations between mining companies and communities as opportunities for feminist activism that can positively affect communities. However, this is just one example. It is important to acknowledge that there are many more examples of when women's voices, especially those from the global South, are missing from CSR initiatives (Grosser, 2016; McCarthy, 2017), including in the mining sector (Keenan et al., 2014; Lauwo, 2016). Nevertheless, we find evidence that new access points for social change are opening for social movements in the era of new governance- for example, through MSIs, input into 'soft' regulation, and opportunities to influence the private sector, and that feminist social movements are beginning to make use of these. Engagement with such access points illustrates new ways in which feminist social movement perspectives are being operationalized in neoliberal times.

***Elite Allies:*** Pollack and Hafner-Burton (2000) posit that political opportunities are also reliant on the existence of elite allies. Within the CSR literature the case has been made for strong leadership on CSR within the firm (Voegtlin, Patzer and Scherer, 2012). With reference to feminist social movements, Meyerson and Scully (1995) assert the importance of 'tempered radicals': those individuals who work for political and social changes, such as gender equality, in strategic ways within organizations. Benschop and Verloo (2011) argue for the importance of 'gender experts' in facilitating gender change, and Walby (2011, p.78) points out that 'feminists are within the institutions of power as well as outside them'. This is true for the private sector as well as the state.

Increasingly, feminist activists move between sectors: government, corporations and civil society, sometimes in search of jobs, or of new ways to work for change. For example,

Kemp, Keenan and Gronow (2010) document how community relations practitioners, some with previous experience in NGOs and government, work from within mining companies to try to minimize the adverse gender impacts of mining, and argue that ‘scholars concerned with civil society should move beyond an “enemy perception” of a “monolithic” private sector as such “hostile simplifications” block learning and the ability to confront industry from an informed yet critical perspective’ (p.580). These authors note senior allies in top management positions in corporations who support feminist agendas by providing resources and championing arguments internally (Kemp et al., 2010). The challenge is that while Pollack and Hafner-Burton (2000) generally view elite allies in a positive light, in the context of the private sector and CSR, scholars now highlight ways in which feminist agendas have been co-opted by business in attempts to fix individual women as market actors, with no recognition of wider structural inequality, to which corporations often contribute (Roberts, 2015).

We find, however, some evidence that business leaders have used their power to advance feminist perspectives which challenge wider *societal* gender inequality. Examples include: Anita Roddick’s support for Women’s Aid’s campaign against domestic violence (Grosser, 2016; Harwin, 2016); involvement of women business leaders in the Fawcett Society’s campaign against ‘Sexism in the City’ (Grosser, 2016) and support for the payment of wages for domestic work in the Fairtrade value chain (Butler and Hoskyns, 2016). These issues demand discussion of patriarchy, male power and violence, and require collaborative, social change beyond the individualism found in neoliberalizing feminism.

Therefore, we argue that one way in which feminist social movements have advanced in the corporate-dominated world is through alliances with elite allies in corporations or in CSR processes and practice, as well as in government. The limitations of this approach for women’s NGOs is outlined well by Harwin (2016), and the possibility of co-optation also

exists in such contexts. However, the literature on ‘tempered radicals’ reveals that feminist social movements can play an important role in supporting feminists inside mainstream organizations/corporations, as they provide opportunities for ‘co-optation check-ins’ (Meyerson and Scully, 1995, p.598) that aim to keep each other on course with regard to wider feminist aims.

### *Mobilizing Structures*

Mobilizing structures are defined as: ‘those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action’ (McAdam et al., 1996, p.3). They include: informal networks of activists and experts, or movement ‘communities’; formal committees or associations that fall under larger institutions and formalised social movement organizations, such as NGOs. These can be considered mobilizing structures if they are ‘actively seeking to implement the preference structures of a given social movement’ (Buechler, 1990, p.42 in McCarthy, 1996, p.143). These forms enact ‘tactical repertoires’ (McCarthy, 1996, p.142): including but not limited to campaigns, communications and protest (McCarthy, 1996).

For example, Pollack and Hafner-Burton (2000), focusing on gender mainstreaming in the EU, identify ‘supranational actors’ in the form of equal opportunities ‘units’ and ‘committees’ in the European Commission and the European Parliament. These, they argue, ‘form the heart of the transnational network of experts and activists’ who have ‘succeeded in placing on the agenda a wide range of issues previously beyond the scope of EU policy-making’ (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000, p.434). Moghadam (2013) identified a similar feminist transnational network collaborating around the 1995 UN conference on women.

Women’s NGOs are particularly important mobilizing structures in that they are sometimes able to lobby and pressurise for change on gender equality issues within political



opportunities structures (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000). They may exert pressure through external campaigns, awareness-raising, fundraising, and through carrying out research (Moghadam, 2013), as well as internal ‘backroom’ conversations.

***Mobilizing Structures –Forms:*** In an era of new governance, corporations and their CSR practices are becoming important institutions of global governance for feminist mobilizing structures. For example, formal groups include: The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) which convened a gender working group to integrate gender perspectives into the most widely used set of corporate sustainability reporting guidelines globally (Grosser, 2009; Miles, 2011). A similar international gender working group exists for the Women’s Empowerment Principles, a subset of guiding values developed by a group of corporations, NGOs and international organizations to direct corporate behavior regarding gender equality (Kilgour, 2013). At the local level there are corporate stakeholder Steering Committees, and External Advisory Panels on gender (e.g. in Kenyan horticulture- Hale and Opondo, 2005, and at Rio Tinto- Kemp et al., 2010). Such groups are not without their problems: many are by invite only; often heavily skewed towards representation of ‘elite’ white women, predominantly from economics and corporate backgrounds (Prügl and True, 2014), and equal access for women’s NGOs compared to other NGOs, remains a significant problem (Grosser, 2016). Nevertheless, while often considered sites for the neoliberalization of feminism by corporate actors, such initiatives can also be vehicles through which feminist social movements can contest this, and attempt to advance their wider social change interests.

Women’s NGOs, while not predominantly focused on corporations (Kilgour, 2007), do increasingly contest the neoliberalization of feminism and challenge corporate practice. For example, as explored in the Political Opportunities section above, the ETI was mobilized effectively by the British women’s NGO WWW in collaboration with the Kenyan Women

Workers Organization to improve working conditions in the cut flower sector (Hale and Opondo, 2005). This cross-national collaboration between women's NGOs enabled WWW to take reports of Kenyan women workers' grievances directly to UK buyers. More recent literature shows women's NGOs continuing to participate in the development, monitoring and verification of labour standards in corporate value chains (Barrientos and Evers, 2014). Whilst debate continues about the impact of such mobilization, we argue that CSR and the resultant governance mechanisms form new mobilizing structures that can, and are, being used by feminist social movements. Moreover, despite their limitations, we must ask what the implications might be of feminist social movements/activists *not* engaging in mobilizing structures in new governance systems that are setting new rules and norms for business behavior regarding social and environmental impacts globally.

***Mobilizing Structures – Tactics:*** Following SMT, we would also expect to see a combination of adversarial *and* collaborative NGO tactics challenging corporate power and the neoliberalization of feminism. For example, the Porgera Women's Association in Papua New Guinea was established to help women challenge mining companies regarding impacts on communities' health (Gibson and Kemp, 2008). In the UK the Fawcett Society has campaigned, in collaboration with business women, against the routine use of pornography in the workplace, and of lap-dancing clubs in business entertainment, in the City of London (Grosser, 2016). They collaborated with corporate managers to set up a Gender Equality Forum, advising on gender equality internally in workplaces, and later incorporating government representatives in this discussion, in effect creating a mini MSI on gender equality (Grosser, 2016). Women's NGOs have also formed alliances with large development NGOs, such as Oxfam and World in Action to organize around gender and labour rights in corporate value chains (Barrientos and Evers, 2014; Hale and Wills, 2007). These are all

strategies through which feminist social movements forward wider social change objectives to contend, or off-set, the neoliberalization of feminism.

A rallying cry of intersectional feminism has been that unity lies in feminist social movement coalitions building around specific issues and causes (Walby, 2011). There is emerging evidence of approaches to feminist activism incorporating experiences at different sites of oppression, and different locations in global value chains, involving alliances between feminist activists/NGOs in the global North and South. Hale and Shaw (2001, pp.525-526) argue that ‘strategies based on building connection and campaigns along commodity chains provide a space in which to bring producers and consumers closer together’. Such alliances can strengthen the capacity of small women’s NGOs, and particularly local women workers’ organizations (Barrientos and Evers, 2014). In sum, evidence suggests that as corporate power grows *vis-à-vis* state power, some feminist social movements are beginning to align along global value chains, rather than simply across national and international state structures. Thus, feminist perspectives and their associated movements are moving into new arenas of governance adopting new strategies and tactics that run alongside- and challenge- neoliberal feminist ideas. Analysis of this phenomenon has been missing from the feminist literature to date, and needs further investigation.

Finally, in a context where many social movements, including feminist ones, are marginalized from CSR as a process of governance due to lack of resources (Bolström and Hallström, 2010; Grosser, 2016), new mobilizing structures, both forms and tactics, are emerging involving online feminist activism (Evans, 2015). These exist as spaces for communicating with (e.g. the Women’s Empowerment Principles working group open online forum- Kilgour, 2013) and campaigning against corporations. For example, the feminist ‘No More Page 3’ campaign in the UK systematically targeted retailers’ Facebook and Twitter pages in their quest to remove photographs of naked women from *The Sun* newspaper

(Glozer, McCarthy and Whelan, 2015). Evidence increasingly testifies to the impact of online protests on corporate profits (e.g. van den Broek et al. 2017). Thus, as corporations are targeted by feminist social movements online we posit that the importance of this space as a political site for diverse feminist perspectives will garner much more traction in practice and in theory.

### *Strategic Framing*

Social movement theorists have focused increasingly on the importance of ‘strategic framing processes’. These are discussed first as ‘focused conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action’ (McAdams et al., 1996, p.96). Second, social movements frame their causes ‘in order to resonate or “fit” (Snow and Benford, 1992, p.137) with the existing dominant frames held by various actors, who are more likely to adopt new frames that resonate rather than conflict with their existing dominant frames (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000). For example, feminist social movements have framed their agendas with reference to productivity and efficiency gains available to EU governments (Pollack and Hafner-Burton, 2000), and nationally, in the case of domestic violence and its impact upon national productivity and social welfare costs (Heo, 2010; Walby, 2011). They have done so strategically in order to influence government agendas.

Moreover, strategic framing typically reflects wider cultural contexts and changes, including the ‘extant stock of meanings, beliefs, ideologies, practices, values, myths, narratives’ and changing ‘targeted audiences’ (Benford and Snow, 2000, p.629). Thus, as dominant social, political, economic or institutional contexts change in a neoliberal global political economy, the framing of social movement, including feminist, agendas change also. This might explain to some extent the neoliberalization of feminism, with its increasing focus

on the ‘business case’ for gender equality in the context of growing corporate power. On the one hand, this change could be interpreted as a process of successful strategic framing by feminist activists, and on the other, as a process of co-optation by business interests. We would argue that both these things are happening simultaneously, and that this explains why ‘neoliberal feminism’ (Rottenberg, 2014) has become the site of such contention in feminist scholarship. Indeed, it is well established that attempts to advance gender equality and organizational efficiency simultaneously, as in the productivity and efficiency frame, or the business case, frequently results in an instrumental takeover, to the exclusion of the social change agenda (Coleman and Rippin, 2000). However, this does not mean that the more radical or critical perspectives and their associated social movements have gone away (Gherardi, 1995). Rather these movements are developing new strategies to fit with new political and economic conditions, sometimes alluding to the business case frame as a strategic device to open space for their agendas in private sector contexts.

Notably, Benford and Snow (2000, p.625) argue that new ‘frame extensions’, such as the business case for gender equality frame, can lead to ‘disputes within movements regarding issues of ideological “purity”, efficiency and “turf”’ and thus increase instability in the movement. Our argument is that this is exactly what is happening currently in feminist scholarship. It would be wrong to assume that because the dominant framing has changed, that critical feminist perspectives are in decline. Rather, this is a space of contestation.

Indeed, a closer inspection of literature exploring gender and the corporate sectors reveals a multitude of diverse feminist frames co-existing alongside the business-case frames that corporations propagate. For example, human rights, and labor rights frames of gender equality argue for the scrutiny, leverage or sometimes abolishment of corporate practices, such as private labor standards, codes of conduct, or MSIs (e.g. Elias, 2007). These strategic framings often appear to address governments indirectly, in calling for cross-national and

global standards and regulations on women workers' rights that better control corporate actors. The literature also reveals the existence of an environmental strategic framing of gender equality (Marshall, 2007; 2011; Phillips, 2014), which positions gender equality as crucial to environmental sustainability.

Finally, we identify in the literature the emergence of a strategic framing of neoliberal arenas as sites where the advancement of feminist social movement perspectives must be fought for, asking, for example, 'How might women, and women's organizations use the new rhetoric about girls and development to some advantage?' (Grosser and Van de Gaag, 2013, p.82). Others argue that corporate reporting (Grosser and Moon, 2008), codes of conduct (Hale and Wills, 2007), MSIs (Elias, 2007; Prügl, 2015; Prügl and True, 2014) and stakeholder engagement (Gibson and Kemp, 2008; Grosser, 2009; Kemp et al., 2010) can be used by feminist activists to contend neoliberal agendas. Grosser (2016) suggests that feminist social movements can instrumentalize CSR rhetoric on gender equality to reaffirm and advance their agendas.

## **Conclusions**

Recent literature has argued that corporate actors, and their CSR initiatives, play significant roles in the neoliberalization of feminism (Prügl, 2015). However, we further the argument that CSR also constitutes new sites and processes of political struggle for the contestation of such interests, wherein feminist engagement is important (Grosser and Moon, 2005) and where more research is needed. Prügl (2015, p.627) concludes that 'the challenge for scholars is to better understand the conditions under which neoliberalized feminisms provide openings to challenge oppressive power relations'. Our paper advances this agenda by adopting a social movement theory lens that enables us to identify numerous new strategies for change on the part of feminist social movements as they make use of new political opportunities,

mobilizing structures and strategic framing processes to advance their agendas in neoliberal times.

In so doing we contribute to SMT by challenging previous notions of politics, and political spaces, and exploring how feminist movements might seize opportunities to enact social change. Few scholars have commented on the role of feminist social movements as they relate to markets, private sector organizations, transnational corporations, or new governance systems that incorporate business and civil society as well as the state (Squires, 2007; Walby, 2011). Moreover, those that have begun to acknowledge such issues provide very few pointers for feminist organizing. We therefore contribute to the scholarly debate on feminism in neoliberal times in three ways.

First, we mobilize SMT to highlight the changing strategies of feminist social movements, providing a conceptual framework for further research on this topic. Second, by so doing, and revealing examples of how this is playing out in practice, we are able to show how feminist social movements not only co-exist with neoliberal feminism, but continue to flourish, adopting new activist strategies that challenge corporate power in a variety of ways. Third, while it's important to highlight the focus on individualism in neoliberalized feminism (Roberts, 2015; Dean, 2010), by bringing attention back onto feminist social movements, which aim to advance collective solutions to communal problems, and how they are *actually* operating and strategizing in neoliberal times, we contest the idea of a large-scale co-optation of feminism becoming 'capitalism's handmaiden' (Fraser, 2013). Our conclusions are rather more hopeful.

Our approach is not without its limitations. Here we address three in particular. First, while we have outlined many structures, forms, tactics, allies and frames which show potential for feminist social movement strategies within neoliberal arenas, we cannot vouch for the success, or outcomes, of these. Further empirical research is needed that unpacks such

strategies' impact. Second, we have recognized that for many marginalized peoples, including feminist groups and individuals, CSR governance arenas are difficult to enter, tough to maneuver within, and often frustrating to work with (Boström and Hallström, 2010; Grosser, 2016; Miles, 2011). These challenges may sometimes exceed those of working with state organizations and are in need of further investigation and research. Third, while we have found examples of feminist social movements building alliances along corporate global value chains to advance their agendas, we note a growing literature revealing the challenges for women from the global South with respect to CSR (e.g. Alamgir and Cairns, 2017; Barrientos et al., 2003; McCarthy, 2017; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2018; Tornhill, 2016a). Further research that seeks to learn how women's NGOs from these countries engage with and challenge corporations, including through CSR, will be important in advancing an intersectional feminist research agenda.

In addition, we have noted the threat of co-optation by business with respect to feminist agendas in the context of CSR (Prügl, 2015). Yet, historically evidence suggests that feminist movements are not so easily co-opted. For example, Banaszak (2010) reveals that 'once inside the state, feminist movements did not, as social movement theory and organizational behavior might predict, become more moderate in their goals or institutionalized and conventional in their tactics. Instead, their choice of tactics, their strategic behavior, and their impact on policy varied in regard to the political opportunities available' (Beckwith, 2011, in Banaszak, 2010, p.1064). Moreover, evidence suggests that such movements sometimes radicalized insider women (p. 1064).

We recognize a growing body of critical research revealing the limitations of non-state governance, including weak enforcement and its tendency to depoliticize and overlook trade union rights (Salmivaara, 2017). The feminist literature builds upon such critiques. Yet we consider that as much as feminist activists and scholars might wish that state power was



not being eroded, and that the power of corporations was not on the rise, governance systems are changing and corporate roles within these are increasing. As a result, the strict differentiation between these two sets of actors is being challenged and broken down in numerous ways. Thus, our interest is in how the strategies of feminist activists are evolving in these contexts, rather than evaluating the pros and cons of different governance systems for feminist social movement ideas, which others have addressed extensively (e.g. Cullen, 2015; Roberts, 2015; Walby, 2015).

In line with this argument, we highlight how feminist research underscores the necessity of political representation in *all* forms of societal governance. Thus, we do not argue for engagement in new governance systems as an alternative to, or replacement for, engaging with the State, and democracy, but rather as a complementary strategy. The importance of such a strategy varies depending on local governance context. For example, we note that where states are weak in many parts of the world and are unwilling or unable to advance gender equality effectively, feminist social movements have had to engage with/address corporations and CSR directly (e.g. Karam and Jamali, 2013). Moreover, research testifies to the important role government can play in driving CSR itself (Gond et al., 2011, Knudsen and Moon, 2017). Therefore, echoing Funk (2013) and Prügl (2015) we see neoliberal arenas as new areas of governance in which feminist social movements need to engage, and which we, as feminist scholars, should investigate. Consequently we have asked: what might be the implications of feminist activists *not* engaging in governance systems involving the private sector that are contesting the meaning of feminism?

In concluding we join others (Grosser, 2016; Prügl, 2015) in arguing for the importance of research that is both critical of the elements of neoliberal feminism, *and* engaged with them: not just critical, and not simply engaged. Our analysis finds a number of accounts by scholars adopting this strategy. They explore the potential of partnerships,

formulations of codes of conduct and private standards (Elias, 2003), and advisory, research or working group roles (Miles, 2011; Grosser, 2016), as well as showing how feminists continue to take up adversarial, campaigning positions in relation to private sector as well as government actors (Barrientos and Evers, 2014; Hale and Shaw, 2007; Hale and Opondo, 2005). Finally, feminist research has commonly been linked to feminist activism. In the SMT literature Gamson and Meyer (1996, p.287) argue that ‘if movement activists interpret political space in ways that emphasize opportunity rather than constraint, they may stimulate actions that change opportunity, making their opportunity frame a self-fulfilling prophecy’. In this sense, by framing corporations, and CSR, as spaces where the neoliberalization of feminism unfolds, but where it can also be contested, our paper aims to contribute to advancing social movement feminist perspectives in practice, as well as in research.

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